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A Brief History of The Plight of the Jews in England: 740-1290

A Brief History of The Plight of the Jews in England: 740-1290

By
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It seems Jews were first mentioned in English chronicles in approximately 740. Almost three-hundred-years later, Jews are recorded as having been banished from the land of “Albion” (England), in 1020, apparently by King Canute. It would be over forty-years later, with the Norman Invasion of England in 1066, before the Jews returned to England, settling predominantly in London and Lincoln. They were in turn treated favorably by William Rufus (the Son and Successor to William I), Henry I, and Henry II, and general calm reigned. It was, however, one-hundred-and-twenty-three years later, that the Jewish people again found themselves the victims of persecution, on English soil.

1189 was an awful year for English Jews. With the death of Henry II, Prince Richard, Henry's third son, seceded to the throne, and was henceforth known as King Richard I, the "Coeur De Lion". Richard had spent the interim gaily involved in martial pursuits against his father and brothers. The coronation of the thirty-two year-old King, took place at Westminster Abbey, on the 3rd September 1189, and with public sentiment clearly against the Jewish populace, Richard issued a proclamation declaring that no Jews what-so-ever were to attend the ceremony. Why Richard decided thus, is possibly because he wished to gain a measure of popularity among his subjects. However some wealthy Jews did attend the coronation, bearing rich gifts which they duly presented to their new sovereign, in the hope that he too would afford them the protection, his Royal predecessors had. Richard accepted the gifts, and gave permission for the bearers thereof, to remain, and attend the lavish feast. Inevitably, a quarrel ensued between the so-called "Christians" (who behaved in a rather un-Christian-like way) and the Jews. The result was that the Jews were violently ejected from the Hall.

The multitude of King Richard's "subjects", waiting outside the walls of their sovereign's palace, interpreted the events as an invitation by Richard himself, to turn upon and destroy the Jews. The Jews were at first beaten with "staves" and then pelted with stones, before some were cold-bloodedly murdered, in the streets of London! Jews, in general, then took to their homes, barricading themselves behind their doors. But it was all in vain, for the blood-thirsty mob proceeded to set fire to the dwellings. What followed is ghastly to relate. Some Jewish men, women and children, perished, being burned alive, all-the-while their pitiful cries and agonized pleas for help, were met only by "savage peals of laughter".
Others, desperately Attempting to escape the "blazing ruins" were received upon "the points of the swords and spears of their murderers, and so perished".
Some Jews, aged or sick, were actually thrown or defenestrated from their own windows, "into fires that had been lit beneath in the streets". This barbaric blood-letting continued for two days, and so many Jewish homes consumed by fire, that it was feared at one stage that London-itself, might be burned razed to the ground.

It must be said that King Richard I, when apprised of the situation, immediately sent some of his "chief-officers" to put an end to such awful savagery, and afforded protection to those Jewish victims still alive. King Richard I, even went so far as to personally endeavour to put a halt to the carnage himself. What followed must truly be regarded as one of the worst miscarriages of justice in history. The lord Justiciary,

Glanville, was tasked with finding those ring-leaders responsible, and punishing them accordingly. But, because it soon became apparent that so many wealthy citizens were themselves involved, “it was thought prudent to take further notice of the matter”. The punishment? Only three men were hanged for their part in the massacre! And that was because they had burnt the houses of some Christians, along with the jews!

Sadly, this massacre of the Jews was not confined to London, and the madness soon spread to Norwich, York, Stamford and other english towns and cities! In York alone, No-less than five-hundred Jews (who were besieged in York castle)were forced to cut their throats, in order to escape the wrath of the mob. Thus it was that the great majority of Jews in England fell victim to unbridled savagery, butchered in their droves! There was also, of course, no recourse to justice, and many of the very miscreants responsible for these acts of barbarity were soon, together with King Richard I, on their way to the holy land, to partake in the crusades.

Then came the reign of King John, the youngest of the five sons of King Henry II, and thus the youngest brother of King Richard I, and an amoral man if ever there was one. it was a disastrous period in the history of England, resulting in a war with France (which saw the loss of Normandy), a quarrel with the pope, and war with the English barons (which resulted in the signing of the Magna Carta, in 1215). But, it was singularly disastrous for his Jewish subjects, for they suffered immense hardships and injustices under this most unjust of kings.
Under John’s reign of terror, the poor Jews were “robbed in the most shameful manner, thrown into dungeons, and tortured until they consented to pay large sums for their liberty.” This, only fifteen-years after the massacres of 1189. It is recorded that on one occasion King John demanded the gargantuan sum of ten thousand marks from a very rich Jew. The poor, wretched, fellow pleaded that he did not possess such a fortune, and was duly interned in prison, and suffered the removal of a single tooth, each and every day until he was prepared to pay the nefarious and evil John, the money. He underwent seven such operations before succumbing , to what, surely, must be a most excruciating pain, and proffered up his wealth to King John. Many Jews, both male and female, were imprisoned during his reign, and “their eyes or teeth plucked out, and numbers inhumanly butchered”. Fortunately, this despicable Tyrant died in 1216, but there was but a short respite from subjugation and oppression for the Jews.

In 1262, during the reign of King Henry III, at least 600 Jews, men, women and even children, were butchered, because they were said to be “enemies to liberty, and had Greek fire hid [Sic] in their houses to destroy the patriots”. Henry extorted vast sums of money from his Jewish subjects, and at one stage peremptorily demanded 8, 000 marks, otherwise he would hang them all. The Jews in turn fleeced the people, and were said to, at times, have charged almost fifty-percent interest on the money they lent! It was, indeed, a vicious circle.

The years went by, and yet the heartless extortion, oppression , and subjugation continued. Along came the reign of Edward I, also known as “Longshanks”, and with it, the expulsion of the Jewish people from English soil. Edward I was a zealot and crusader, and thus hated all “unbelievers”, the Jews among them. In the early part of Edward’s reign, the “coin had been very much clipped and debased, and Jews were accused of this offence”. Of course, being businessmen, some Jews were probably guilty of this, but the punitive action taken in response, was harsh, to say the very least! In London, in 1278, no-less than 280 Jewish Men and Women were actually hung for this “crime”. Once accused, a Jew had absolutely no chance, and if, mercifully, he was not forced to forfeit his life, then his property was promptly confiscated. He was prohibited from charging interest on money lent, and, almost seven-hundred years before the advent of Hitler and the Nazi Regime, He was “compelled to wear a badge upon his dress, as a mark of disgrace, and an invitation to the insults of enemies”. It was Edward “Longshanks”, who during his reign ordered the arrest of all Jews, and subsequent incarceration. They were not liberated until thry paid a hefty fine of 12,000 pounds. Then came the 27 July 1290, and King Edward I, allegedly through the insistence of his mother, the dowager queen, Eleanor, stipulated that all Jews resident in England, should, within two months, leave the kingdom, never to return, under the penalty of death.

History records the banishment of roughly 16, 511 Jews, from England. And so began the sad Diaspora of English Jews. Edward, and England, would regret their decision, for commerce suffered accordingly! It would be three-hundred-and-seventy-years before the Jewish people returned.
In 1650, Oliver Cromwell permitted the Jews to return to England, granting a pension to Menassah Ben Israel, in 1655.
But their fight, for freedom and equality, was far from over.
It was 1723 before Jews acquired the right to possess land in England.

While a statute permitting the Jews the right of naturalization in England, was only passed in 1753.
And in 1835, an act had to be passed by parliament to allow the first Jewish Mayor, David Salomons, to perform his duties!
However,it would be a further twenty-three years, in July 1858, before an act was passed enabling Jews to sit in parliament “by resolution of the house”, this, twenty-five years after the abolition of slavery in the British empire!
No People, no Nations, are devoid of history; and no history is free of iniquities!

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